

# S E R M O N . V.

## HOW TO BEAR AFFLICTIONS.

HEBREWS XII. 5.

My son despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.

**T**HE words are an excellent passage from the book of the Proverbs; Prov. 3. 12. wherein the supreme eternal wisdom is represented, giving instruction to the afflicted, how to behave themselves under troubles, so as they may prove beneficial to them: the counsel is, that they should preserve a temperament of spirit, between the excess and defect of patience and courage, neither despising the chastenings of the Lord, by a sinful neglect of them as a small unconcerning matter, nor fainting under them, as a burden so great and oppressing, that no deliverance was to be expected. To enforce the exhortation, wisdom useth the amiable and endearing title, "My Son," to signify that God in the quality of a Father, corrects his people; the consideration whereof is very proper to conciliate reverence to his hand, and to encourage their hopes of a blessed issue.

The proposition that arises from the words is this;

It is the duty and best wisdom of afflicted christians, to prevail.

serve themselves from the vicious extremes of despising the chastenings of the Lord, or fainting under them.

To illustrate this by a clear method, I shall endeavour to show,

I. What it is to despise the chastenings of the Lord, and the causes of it.

II. What fainting under his rebukes signifies, and what makes us incident to it.

III. Prove that it is the duty and best wisdom of the afflicted to avoid these extremes.

IV. Apply it.

I. i. To despise the chastenings of the Lord, imports the making no account of them, as unworthy of serious regard; and includes *Ολιγώρει* inconsiderateness of mind, and an insensibleness of heart.

1. *Inconsiderateness of mind*, with respect to the author or end of chastenings.

(1.) With respect to the author, when the afflicted looks only downwards, as if the rod of affliction sprang out of the dust, Job 5. 6. and there were no superior cause that sent it.

Thus many apprehend the evils that befall them, either merely as the productions of natural causes, or as casual events, or the effects of the displeasure and injustice of men, but never look on the other side of the veil of the second causes, to that invisible providence that orders all. If a disease strikes their bodies, they attribute it to the extremity of heat or cold, that distempers their humours: if a loss comes in their estates, it is ascribed to chance, carelessness and falseness of some upon whom they depended; but God is concealed from their sight by the nearness of the immediate agent. Whereas the principal cause of all temporal evil is the overruling providence of God. "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" Amos 3. 6. They come not only with his knowledge and will, but by his efficiency. The locusts that infected Egypt, Exod. 10. 13, 19. are as real an effect of God's wrath, as the most miraculous plague, although an east wind brought them, and a west wind carried them away. The arrow that was shot at a venture, and pierced between the joints of Ahab's armour, 1 Kings 22. 34. was directed by the hand of God for his destruction. Shimei's cursing of David, though it was the overflowing of his gall, the effect of

his malignity, yet that holy king looked higher, and acknowledged the Lord hath bidden him. As the Lord is a God of power, 1 Sam. 16. 11. and can inflict what judgments he pleaseth immediately; so he is a God of order, and usually punisheth in this world by subordinate means. Now wherever he strikes; though his hand is wrapped up in a cloud, yet if it be not observed, especially if by habitual incogitancy men consider not with whom they have to do in their various troubles, this profane neglect is no less than a despising the chastenings of the Lord.

(2.) Inconsiderateness of the end of the divine discipline, is a great degree of contempt. The evils that God inflicts are as real a part of his providence, as the blessings he bestows; as in the course of nature the darkness of the night is by his order, as well as the light of the day: therefore they are always sent for some wise and holy design. Sometime, though more rarely, they are only for trial, to exercise the faith, humility, patience of eminent saints; for otherwise God would lose in a great measure the honour and renown, and his favourites the reward of those graces, afflictions being the sphere of their activity. But for the most part they are castigatory, to bring us to a sight and sense of our state, to render sin more evident and odious to us. They are fitly expressed, by pouring from vessel to vessel, that discovers the dregs and sediment, and makes it offensive, that before was concealed. The least affliction even to the godly, is usually an application of the physician of spirits for some growing distemper: every corrosive is for some proud flesh that must be taken away. In short, they are deliberate dispensations to cause men to reflect upon their works and ways, and break off their sins by sincere obedience. Therefore we are commanded "to hear the voice of the rod, and who hath appointed it." Mic. 6. 5. It is a preacher of repentance, to lead us to the knowledge and consideration of ourselves. The distress of Joseph's brethren was to revive their memory of his sorrows caused by their cruelty. Now when men disregard the embassy of the rod, are unconvincible, notwithstanding its lively lessons; when they neither look up to him that strikes, nor within to the cause that provokes his displeasure; when they are careless to reform their ways, and to comply with his holy will, as if afflictions were only common accidents of this mutable state, the effects of rash for-

tune or blind fate, without design and judgment, and not sent for their amendment, this is a prodigious despising of God's hand. For this reason the scripture compares men to the most inobservant creatures, to "the wild ass' colt, the deaf adder, to the silly dove without heart:" Job 11. 12. Psal. 58. 4. Hos. 7. 11. and the advantage is on the beasts' side, for their inconsideration proceeds merely from the incapacity of matter, of which they are wholly composed to perform reflex acts: but man's incogitancy is the sole fault of his spirit, that wilfully neglects his duty. The prophet charges this guilt upon the Jews, "Lord, when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see." Isa. 26. 11.

2. *Insensibility of heart* is an eminent degree of despising the Lord's chastenings. A pensive feeling of judgments is very congruous, whether we consider them in *genere physico*, or *moral*; either materially as afflictive to nature, or as the signs of divine displeasure: for the affections were planted in the human nature by the hand of God himself, and are duly exercised in proportion to the quality of their objects. And when grace comes, it softens the breast, and gives a quick and tender sense of God's frown. An eminent instance we have in David, though of heroic courage; yet in his sad ascent to Mount Olivet, 2 Sam. 15. 30. he went up weeping with his head covered, and his feet bare, to testify his humble and submissive sense of God's anger against him. Now when men are insensible of judgments, either considered as natural or penal evils; if when they suffer the loss of relations or other troubles, they presently fly to the comforts of the heathens, that we are all mortal, and what cannot be helped must be endured, without the sense humanity requires; that calm is like that of the dead sea, a real curse: or suppose natural affection works a little, yet there are no apprehension and concernment for God's displeasure, which should be infinitely more affecting than any outward trouble, how sharp soever, no serious deep humiliation under his hand, no yielding up ourselves to his management; this most justly provokes him: of this temper were those described by Jeremiah, "Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they refused to receive correction." Jer. 5. 3.

ii. The causes of this despising of God's chastenings are:

1. A contracted stupidity of soul, proceeding from a course in sin. There is a natural stubbornness and contumacy in the heart

against God, a vicious quality derived from rebellious Adam; we are all hewn out of the rock, and digged out of the quarry: and this is one of the worst effects of sin, and a great part of its deceitfulness, that by stealth it increaseth the natural hardness, by degrees it creeps on like a gangrene, Heb. 3. 13. and causes an indolency. The practice of sin makes the heart like an adamant, Zech. 7. 12. the hardest of stones, that exceeds that of rocks. From hence proceeds such unteachableness of the mind, that when God speaks and strikes, yet sinners will not be convinced; that briars and thorns are only effectual to teach them; and such an untractableness in the will, that when the sinner is stormed by affliction, and some light breaks into the understanding, yet it refuseth to obey God's call.

2. Carnal diversions are another cause of slighting God's hand. The pleasures and cares of the world, Luke 21. 34. as they render men inapprehensive of judgments to come, so regardless of those that are present. Some when ever they feel the smart of a cross, use all the arts of oblivion to lose the sense of it. The affliction instead of leading them to repentance, leads them to vain conversations, to comedies and other sinful delights, to drive away sorrow. Others, although they do not venture upon forbidden things to relieve their melancholy, yet when God by sharp and sensible admonitions calls upon them, they have presently recourse to temporal comforts, which although lawful and innocent in themselves, yet are as improper at that time, as the taking of a cordial when a vomit begins to work: for whereas chastisements are sent to awaken and affect us, by considering our sins in their bitter fruits, this unseasonable application of sensual comforts wholly defeats God's design. For nothing so much hinders serious consideration as a voluptuous indulging the senses in things pleasing; like opiate medicines, they stupify the conscience, and benumb the heart. It is Solomon's expression, "I said of laughter, it is mad:" for as distraction breaks the connexion of the thoughts, so mirth shuffles our most serious thoughts into disorder, and causes men to pass over their troubles without reflection and remorse. 1 Kings 16.

And as the pleasures, so the business of the world causes a supine security under judgments. We have an amazing instance of it in Hiel the Bethlemite, who laid the foundation of his city in the death of his first-born, and set up the gates of it in his

youngest son ; yet he was so intent upon his building, that he disregarded the divine Nemesis, Josh. 6. 26. that was apparent, fulfilling the terrible threatening prophesied against the builder of Jericho.

3. An obstinate fierceness of spirit, a diabolical fortitude is the cause that sometimes men despise afflicting providences so far as to resist them. There is a passive malignity in all, an inaptness to be wrought on, and to receive spiritual and heavenly impressions from God's hand ; but in some of the sons of perdition there is an active malignity, whereby they furiously repel judgments as if they could oppose the Almighty. Their hearts are of an anvil-temper, made harder by afflictions, and reverberate the blow, like that Roman emperor, who instead of humbling and reforming at God's voice in thunder, thundered back again. All judgments that befall them, are as strokes given to wild beasts, that instead of taming them, enrage them to higher degrees of fierceness.

The prophet described some of this rank of sinners, who said "in the pride and stoutness of their hearts, the bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones : the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars." Isa. 9. 9, 10.

And many though explicitly, yet virtually declare a resolution, notwithstanding the most visible discouragements from heaven, to proceed in their sinful courses with more greediness, and from a sullen secret atheism are more strongly carried to gratify their lusts again, when they are in afflictions.

II. I shall proceed to consider the other extreme of fainting under God's rebukes.

1. The original word *Ἐκλύω* signifies the slackening and relaxing of things that were firmly joined together. The strength of the body proceeds from the union of the parts, when they are well compacted together. By their disjoining it is enfeebled, and rendered unfit for labour. In this motion the apostle in the 12th. verse "exhorts them to lift up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees:" that is, to encourage and strengthen their souls by a real belief of the promises made to afflicted christians.

2. It may respect the sinking, and falling away of the soul like water, being hopeless of overcoming troubles. When water is frozen into hard ice, it will bear a great burden, but when it

is dissolved and melted, nothing is weaker. So the "spirit of a man" confirmed by religious principles, "is able to sustain all his infirmities." Prov. 19. 14. *Si fractus illabatur orbis*, if the weight of the heaviest afflictions fall upon him, yet his mind remains erect and unbroken, and bears them all with courage and constancy: but if through impatience under tribulation, and diffidence in the divine promises, we shrink from our duty, or reject "the comforts of God as if they were small," and not proportionable to the evils that oppress us; this is to faint when we are rebuked by him.

The causes of this despondency are usually;

(1.) Either the kind of the affliction: when there is a singularity in the case, it increaseth the apprehension of God's displeasure; because it may signify an extraordinary guilt, and singular unworthiness in the person that suffers; and upon that account, that sorrow swells so high as to overwhelm him.

(2.) The number and degrees of afflictions; when like those black clouds which in winter days join together, and quite intercept the beams of the sun: so many troubles meet at once, and deprive us of all present comfort. Job lost his children by a sudden unnatural death; and was tormented in all the parts of his body, and reduced from his rich abundance to the dunghil, and a potsherd to scrape his boils. Indeed his heroic spirit was supported under those numerous and grievous troubles, but such a weight were enough to sink the most.

(3.) The continuance of afflictions. When the clouds return after rain, and the life is a constant scene of sorrows, we are apt to be utterly dejected, and hopeless of good. The psalmist tells us, "All the day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning;" Psal. 73. 14. and from thence was strongly tempted to despair.

(4.) Comparing their great sufferings with the prosperity of those who are extremely vicious, inclines some to despair. For not only their present evils are heightened, and more sensibly felt by the comparison, but the prosperous impiety of others tempts them to think there is no just and powerful providence that distributes things below; and looking no higher than to second causes, that are obvious to sense, they judge their state past recovery.

III. The next thing is to prove, that it is the duty and wis-

dom of the afflicted not to despise the chastenings of the Lord, nor to faint under them.

First, It is their duty carefully to avoid those extremes, because they are very dishonourable to God.

1. The contempt of chastisements is high profanation of God's honour, who is our father and sovereign, and in that quality afflicts us: it is our apostle's argument, "Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence; shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" Heb. 12. 9. It is a principle deeply planted in the human nature, which the most barbarous nations have kept inviolable, to express the realest respect to our parents, from whom we derive our life, and by whose tender care we have been preserved, and educated, although their discipline be rigorous: but it is infinitely more just and reasonable, that we should reverently submit to the Father of spirits, who hath the highest right in us. As much as the immortal spirit excels the infirm corruptible flesh, proportionably should our reverence to God, when he most sharply rebukes us, exceed our respects to our earthly fathers when they correct us. The manner of the apostle's expression is very significant, "Shall we not much rather?" If there be any vital spark of conscience remaining in our breasts, if reason be not wholly declined to brutishness, we cannot do otherwise.

2. Fainting under chastenings reflects dishonourably upon God. It is true in some respects, those who are extremely dejected, are not so guilty as the despisers; for usually they acknowledge the order and justice of his providence. But that false conception of the Father of mercies, either that he willingly afflicts the children of men, or that he hates them because he afflicts them here, is so contrary to his holy nature, and injurious to his goodness; 1 John 4. 9. the special character of his nature, that it is an equal provocation, with the slighting of his sovereignty.